

TELEPHONE BEFRIENDING AT A TIME OF CRISIS

WHERE ARE WE NOW The Coronavirus has come so fast. Even before the ink is dry on this paper the situation and the guidance will have changed. **So:**

Rule 1: Always follow most up-to-date Government guidance and advice from the SVP.

Rule 2: Look after yourself. It is the best resource for offering good support to others.



What seems most likely is that the steep trajectory of deaths from this highly contagious disease is likely to continue before it slows down. More and more people will be affected. The people we already befriend may be affected, new contacts will be affected, you may be affected - by isolation, by loss, grief and bereavement. Befriending conversations will become deeper and harder. What makes this more difficult is that our normal face-to-face systems of support have been kicked away; we can no longer hug, or physically reach out a hand, we cannot watch for those visible signs that tell us so much about how the other person is feeling. We cannot offer a tissue when they cry. The person we are talking to may have had to say goodbye to a loved one over the phone; perhaps they will not have had the chance to say goodbye at all. This will have an impact on their grief.

WHAT CAN WE DO? IT IS A QUESTION OFTEN ON OUR LIPS, BUT BEFORE WE FALL INTO THE TEMPTATION OF ACTIVITY, I WOULD LIKE TO SUGGEST AN ALTERNATIVE QUESTION: WHO CAN WE BE, OR HOW CAN WE BE, FOR OTHER PEOPLE?

Be there for them – Totally attentive in the time and space that the conversation lasts. Do not measure success by the number of people you connect with, but by the quality of time that you give to each one. Listen carefully; speak only according to their need.

Be sensitive to where they are – Physically and emotionally. Check out that this is a good time for a phone call. Take the conversation at their pace; they may launch immediately into a request for prayer, or begin to describe their anxiety and pain. More likely, they will begin with something lighter. Allow them to say what they will; do not take them to places they would rather not go.

Be clear – Both in volume and in your words. If the person on the end of the line cannot hear you, they will become frustrated; if they cannot understand why you are calling or what you are trying to say, it will not be helpful. Think about your purpose before you dial. Think about your responses as the conversation unfolds. Steer clear of euphemisms.

Be compassionate – Truly try to understand their situation but do not say, "I know how you feel". You don't. Empathise but stay hopeful and positive; it will not be helpful to collaborate with a mood of gloom and doom.

Be ok with silence – This is harder on the phone than face-to-face but the other person may need time to collect themselves, to think something through. Just try to be patient, with the occasional word or murmur so that they know you are still there.

Be ok with distress – Tears are natural and a friendly ear often brings them on. Acknowledge, allow and listen.

Be attuned to your self – How are you reacting to what you are hearing? Is it stirring up feelings that you need to reflect upon, and perhaps share with someone else, later? For now, try to simply be there for the other; and afterwards take time to be there for yourself.

Be attuned to God – He gives us the Holy Spirit to guide us in our need (cf. Romans 8:26). If a prayer or the words of hymn come to mind, try to discern if they would be helpful to the other person at this time. If you think they would, offer to share. Always allow them to say 'no thanks' though.

Be aware of how you sign off – Conversations usually draw to a natural end. People may give you clues about when they're ready to close – listen to them and respond. Try to leave the person in a good place – you will most likely be leaving them alone with their thoughts. Offer a positive summary. Ask what they plan to do now. A cup of tea is often a good idea.